



Amatory Motifs in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

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I. RELATIONAL METAPHORS IN PAULINE INTERPRETATION

IN THE LAST THIRTY YEARS SCHOLARS HAVE REDISCOVERED THAT PAUL DID HIS thinking about God, the church, ministry, and mission with the help of metaphors of social relation. The honor/shame dimension in the Greco-Roman social worlds has been brought to bear on Romans with good effect. The philosopher offering encouragement and exhortation to his students is the model of ministry in 1 Thessalonians and 2 Corinthians. Philippians has been read as a letter of friendship, and knowledge of the common motifs concerning friendship is indispensable for the interpretation of 2 Corinthians. Finally, patron/client and master/slave relations have figured prominently in the study of the Corinthian correspondence.

One social relation receiving less attention in Pauline studies than it deserves is that of the lover and the beloved. Interpreters of Paul have largely ignored the erotic literature of the ancient world, possibly because of the assumption that when Paul talks about love he certainly could not mean *that* kind of love. This objection, however, is mistaken on two counts. First, erotic love, as it is described in ancient

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Paul uses familiar amatory terms to speak of the exclusivity of three critical relationships: the apostle and the Galatian congregations, Paul and Christ, and Christ and the congregations.

sources, is a complex phenomenon. It cannot be reduced to sex alone. In fact, rapid reading of the literature reveals scant attention to sex itself. It is the before and after that really count. Secondly, it is not the thing in itself that interests Paul so much as the various clichés about lovers. He uses the erotic relation as a metaphor.

What did Paul know about Eros? Evidence outside of Galatians suggests that he knew a great deal. Rom 1:24-27 tells us that Paul was quite familiar with the way moral philosophers found fault with erotic love.¹ He nevertheless proudly admits to his own passionate love for the congregation in Corinth. In 2 Cor 2:14 he alludes to a cliché expressing the idea that love conquers all: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession (θριαμβεουσιν)...” The comparison between the lover who is uncertain whether his affection is returned and the conquered nobleman made to march as a slave through the streets of Rome was a quite popular literary motif in Paul’s day.² Finally, from 1 Cor 15:28b (ἵνα ἡ ὁ θεὸς [τὰ] πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν—“so that God may be all in all”) we can see that Paul knows an amatory motif which expresses total devotion of lover to the beloved: “He/she is all things to me.”³

Amatory motifs occur throughout the undisputed Pauline epistles. Nowhere, however, do they occur with such intensity as in Galatians. In a pioneering study on the influence of erotic literature on Paul, Christopher Smith shows how Paul denounces his rivals in Gal 4:17 by calling upon the most common of amatory motifs, the locked-out lover.⁴ Beginning where Smith’s work leaves off, it is possible to identify 32 instances in Galatians in which Paul makes use of the language of love found in Greek and Latin erotic literature. These allusions can be categorized as follows: the unfaithful beloved, the construction of rivals, love spurned and love returned, love’s labors, and the effects of love. In this essay I will identify these amatory motifs in Galatians and make very brief comments on how they work in the argument of the letter.

II. THE UNFAITHFUL BELOVED

Rival missionaries seek to put themselves forward and replace Paul as leader of the churches in Galatia. One of the goals of Galatians is to persuade its audience to remain within the sphere of Paul’s influence. Paul portrays these churches as the unfaithful beloved whose fickleness is worthy of rebuke.

Paul implies a comparison between his audience and an unfaithful beloved in

¹David Fredrickson, “Natural and Unnatural Use in Rom 1:24-27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros,” in *The ‘Plain Sense’ of Scripture, Science, and Homosexuality*, ed. D. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

²Reposianus, *The Intrigue of Mars with Venus* 7; Tibullus 2.5.115-122; Ovid, *Amores* 1.2.19-52; 1.7.35; 2.12.1-16; Propertius 2.8; 2:14. (Unless otherwise indicated, all non-biblical texts and translations are from the Loeb Classical Library).

³David Fredrickson, “God, Christ, and All Things,” *Word & World* 18/3 (1998) 254-263.

⁴Christopher Smith, “Ἐκκληῖσαι in Galatians 4:17: The Motif of the Excluded Lover as a Metaphor of Manipulation,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (1996) 480-499.

1:6: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting (μετατίθεσθε) the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." Desertion was a charge sometimes made by the offended lover against his beloved whose interests had gone elsewhere.⁵

Later in the epistle, Paul softens his charge of desertion by allowing that the churches have come under the influence of witchcraft. In 3:1 we read, "You foolish (ἄνοητοι) Galatians! Who has bewitched (ἐβόσκανεν) you?" Here we have a very popular motif in amatory literature.⁶ Sorcery, magic potions, and spells are the stuff of erotic story line and poetic imagination. Sometimes the practices of witchcraft were employed by suitors to arouse love. Yet more often, like Paul, the frustrated and disappointed lover charges that his beloved has fallen under his rival's sorcery. There is no other way to explain the alienation of affections. The fact that the Galatians are "without minds (ἄνοητοι)" is a direct result of the mind-robbing power of witchcraft.⁷ The Galatians are not so much foolish (as the NRSV translates) as they are mad, robbed of their senses by the spell generated by Paul's rivals.

It is not only Paul that the Galatians are in danger of deserting. Wishing to be justified by the law, they are untrue to another lover, Christ. Although "fallen from grace" is a cliché in English for an inferior arousing a superior's disapproval, in 5:4 the phrase τῆς χάριτος ἐξέπεσατε more likely makes a point about the ruin of love caused by one partner's infidelity. "To fall into (ἐμπίπτειν) love" was a common enough expression reflecting the theme of the lover snared by charms of another like an animal caught in a trap,⁸ and χάρις itself, habitually thought of by Pauline interpreters as grace in a theological sense, carried in erotic contexts the idea of charm.⁹ Paul simply reverses the direction of the fall from "in" to "out of," and this reinforces his imaginative construction of his audience as the unfaithful beloved.

III. THE CONSTRUCTION OF RIVALS

Paul calls upon motifs in amatory literature in order to place his rivals in the worst possible light. The clearest example in the Pauline corpus of his familiarity with erotic literary themes is found in Gal 4:17.¹⁰ Here Paul charges that his rivals

⁵Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale* 3.7; Alciphron, *Epistle* 4.18.13; Propertius 2:15-34.

⁶Philostratus, *Epistle* 22; *Greek Anthology* 5.16, 28, 121, 205, 218; 12.57; Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale* 1.2; Heliodorus, *An Ethiopian Story* 4.6; 8.5; Tibullus 1.2.53-65; 1.5.41-66; 1.8.17-28; Horace, *Epode* 5; Ovid, *Amores* 1.8.1-34; Propertius 1.12.9-10. This topic is well recognized and much discussed. See S. Lilja, *The Roman Elegists' Attitude to Women* (New York: Garland, 1978) 118-119, 150, 205; T. Papanghelis, *Propertius: A Hellenistic Poet on Love and Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1987) 30, 33-41; A. Sharrock, *Seduction and Repetition in Ovid's Ars amatoria II* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1994) 50-78.

⁷Sharrock, *Seduction and Repetition*, 77.

⁸Tibullus 3.1.20; Propertius 2.3.1-2. See E. Fantham, *Comparative Studies in Republican Latin Imagery* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1972) 51-52.

⁹*Greek Anthology* 5.26, 27; 12.93; Plutarch, *Amatorius* 751D; 752C; 762E. K. Preston, *Studies in the Diction of the Sermo Amatorius in Roman Comedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Libraries, 1916) 42.

¹⁰Smith, "Ἐκκλεῖσαι in Galatians 4:17," 480-499. For the motif of the excluded lover, see also Alciphron, *Epistle* 4.10.3; 4.17.5; Philostratus, *Epistle* 2.9; *Greek Anthology* 5.23, 103, 189; 12.193; Ovid, *Amores* 1.6.32; 2.19.19-60; Propertius 1.16.17-32.

“lock out” the congregations in order to increase their ardor (ζῆλος).¹¹ The image that ἐκκλεῖσαι calls forth is that of the suitor, garland in hand, freezing, hungry, and sleepless on the ground just outside his beloved’s door. Paul’s rivals artificially stimulate the Galatians affections. He, however, does indeed court them, but he does so in a noble way (4:18).

Paul’s rivals do not have noble intentions. Three times we read that they are harassing and seducing the congregations in Galatia. In 1:7 and 5:10 Paul uses the verb ταρασσειν (confuse) to speak of the way the rivals bother or upset the congregations.¹² In 5:12 he makes a similar point, although the amatory motif is lost in the various English translations, since they assume that ἀναστατοῦντες is a participial form of ἀναστατόω and not ἀναστατέω. While the former might carry erotic overtones, the latter does so with greater force. It means “seduce.”¹³ This would make Paul’s wish that his rivals would “cut theirs off (ἀποκόψονται)” all the more sardonic. He wishes that the seducers might become irreversibly impotent and therefore no longer a threat.¹⁴

IV. LOVE SPURNED AND LOVE RETURNED

High on the list of events in the lover’s career was the worry about unrequited love and the experience of rejection. Paul alludes to the theme of rejection three times in a passage that is otherwise already full of amatory motifs, 4:9-20. There seems to be no middle ground between love and hate. Like all others caught in Eros’s trap, Paul is either loved or an enemy (ἐχθρος), as we read in 4:16.¹⁵

Perhaps the most common of the terms relating to rejection is “injustice.” In this quasi-legal terminology, the rejected suitor claims that the beloved has wronged (ἀδικεῖν) him or, even worse, wronged love herself.¹⁶ Menander writes, “Sing to me, goddess, sing of such a one as she: audacious, beautiful, and plausible withal; she does you wrong (ἀδικοῦσάν); she locks her door (ἀποκλήουσάν); keeps asking you for gifts; she loveth none, but ever makes pretense.”¹⁷ In 4:12, Paul reminds his hearers of their original love for him and faithfulness to him: οὐδέν με ἠδίκησατε (“You have done me no wrong”).

Two motifs related to the theme of rejection as ἀδικία may be mentioned

¹¹Greek Anthology 5.4; 12.70.

¹²For the language of amatory upset, see D. Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex: A Commentary on De Rerum Natura IV, with Prolegomena, Text, and Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987) 204, 217.

¹³H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. with rev. suppl. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996) 121.

¹⁴For the theme of impotence, see Sharrock, *Seduction and Repetition*, 75-76.

¹⁵Cf. Greek Anthology 12.230.

¹⁶Preston, *Studies in the Diction of the Sermo Amatorius*, 58-60; Lilja, *The Roman Elegists’ Attitude to Women*, 71-72. See also Greek Anthology 5.23; 12.103; Chariton, *Chareas and Callirhoe* 1.2; Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale* 2.5; Catullus 72.

¹⁷Menander, 217 K. The next fragment (218 K) is the familiar “Bad company ruins good morals,” which Paul quotes in 1 Cor 15:33.

here also. The first construes rejection as arrogance.¹⁸ The second has the beloved spitting the lover out: "The image that Love has stamped in the hot depths of thy heart, thou dost now, alas! As I never dreamt, disown (ἀπέπτυσας)." In Gal 4:14, Paul reproduces these motifs in rapid succession: "Though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn (ἐξουθενήσατε) or despise (ἐξεπτύσατε) me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus."

Paul's point made by these clichés concerning spurned love is this: the Galatians' present flirtation with the rival missionaries is all the more reprehensible given the congregations' initial loving reception of the apostle. Paul portrays this loving reception with another important idea drawn from erotic literature, deification. The lover, enraptured by the beloved's beauty, pronounces him/her blessed; or the lover whose love is returned counts himself as a god.²⁰ In 4:14b, Paul reminds his hearers that they originally received him as "an angel of God" and even as "Christ Jesus." He reiterates his deification in their eyes in 4:15: ποῦ οὖν ὁ μακαρισμός ὑμῶν. The act of counting someone blessed (μακαρισμός) is equivalent to deification, since the gods, as opposed to mortals, were often called μακάριος.²¹ Another motif speaking of the depths of love is present in 4:15b: "For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me." Their original devotion to Paul is likened to the lover's willingness even to gouge out his eyes for the beloved.²²

V. LOVE'S LABORS

Erotic literature possesses a rich vocabulary pertaining to the lover acquiring his beloved. Getting loved was hard work or strenuous play. The most frequently occurring terms have to do with the basic metaphor of the hunt. The lover traps or snares (or is trapped or is snared by) the beloved. Included among these terms of courtship relating to the hunt, we find a very popular term, διώκω (pursue or chase), which Paul employs with amatory overtones in 4:29, 5:11, and 6:12.²³

The first of these occurrences (4:29) is particularly interesting. Paul alters Scripture to make it less offensive to an audience who appreciated the nuances of the vocabulary of Eros. The text is Gen 21:9-10: "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing (παίζοντα) with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son

¹⁸*Greek Anthology* 5.299; 12.186, 193; Chariton, *Chareas and Callirhoe* 1.6; Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale* 1.4, 16; 2.1, 5; Heliodorus, *An Ethiopian Story* 7.20, 25.

¹⁹*Greek Anthology* 5.274.

²⁰D. H. Garrison, *Mild Frenzy: A Reading of the Hellenistic Love Epigram* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1978) 81-87. See also *Greek Anthology* 5.15, 94, 255; 12.177; Catullus 45.25-26; 51; Propertius 2.14-15, 30-39.

²¹The NRSV ("What has become of the goodwill you felt?") displays no awareness of this basic aspect of Greek religion and language.

²²Fantham, *Comparative Studies*, 53-54. See also Catullus 82; Propertius 1.15.34.

²³Preston, *Studies in the Diction of the Sermo Amatorius*, 28; Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex*, 273-276. See also *Greek Anthology* 5.59, 247; 12.102; Fronto, *Epistle* 8.5; Horace, *Satires* 1.2.105-110; Propertius 1.1.1.

of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” Although Paul follows this text in 4:30, in 4:29 he makes a substitution. He replaces παίζω with διώκω. Why? By Paul’s day παίζω had become one of the chief euphemisms for sexual activity.²⁴ It implies a seduction accomplished, whereas διώκω merely speaks of the attempt.²⁵ The lover pursues in order to play. This corresponds to the attempt of the rival missionaries to seduce the Galatian congregations—a point that Paul makes elegantly with the phrase “so it is now.”

The erotically charged διώκω in 4:29 prepares us to understand an important theme in Gal 5-6: a battle between ideals of beauty. Paul implies that the crucified Christ defines that which is attractive and worthy of pursuit. In 5:11, Paul, because he refuses to nullify the scandal of the cross, is hotly pursued (not persecuted!). In 6:12 we see that Paul’s rivals, on the other hand, advocate another standard of beauty: they wish to “have fair faces in the flesh (εὐπροσωπήσασιν ἐν σαρκί).”²⁶ Here Paul has withered his opposition by aligning them with an aesthetic that finds its highest expression in a fine looking penis, if we take “flesh” to be a not so oblique reference to that part of male anatomy. His rivals prefer the beauty produced by circumcision to the beauty of the crucified Christ, and so they force circumcision on others lest they be pursued because of the cross of Christ. Paul, it appears, is chased because of his cruciform beauty, and he welcomes the hunt.

We have already seen that 4:12-20 is full of amatory motifs. In the verse leading into this section, Paul portrays himself as the indefatigable lover whose labors now appear to be lost: “I am afraid that my work (κεκοπίακα) for you may have been wasted.”²⁷ Another term, persuasion (πεισμονή, 5:8), reflects a popular amatory motif that can be traced back as far as Homer: to seduce is to persuade.²⁸ Aphrodite was, after all, called Πειθώ.²⁹ Paul accuses his rivals of seduction. Although the congregations had been running well (ἐτρέχετε καλῶς),³⁰ they have been harassed (5:10) and upset (5:12) by the rivals. Paul, however, has labored to win their love.

²⁴J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (New York: Yale University, 1975) 157; J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1982) 161-163. See also *Greek Anthology* 5.7; Philostratus, *Epistle* 55; Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* 3.14.

²⁵Fantham, *Comparative Studies*, 59, 89.

²⁶The NRSV translation of 6:12 (“a good showing in the flesh”) is possible but derivative. Primarily, the word has to do with physical beauty.

²⁷For courting as labor, see N. Zagagi, *Tradition and Originality in Plautus: Studies in the Amatory Motifs in Plautine Comedy* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989) 59-60; Lilja, *The Roman Elegists’ Attitude to Women*, 81. See also *Greek Anthology* 12.145, 172, 258; Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale* 1.6; 5.8; Tibullus 1.4.47; 3.4.65; Propertius 2.23.7; 2.24a.23-39.

²⁸N. Gross, *Amatory Persuasion in Antiquity* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985) 16-19. See also Alciphron, *Epistles* 4.7.4; 4.11.7; 4.16.4; *Greek Anthology* 5.33, 38, 53, 127; 12.179, 211.

²⁹Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex*, 279.

³⁰For the amatory connotations of “running,” see Fantham, *Comparative Studies*, 68; Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex*, 311.

VI. THE EFFECTS OF LOVE

“Love is blind,” it is said. Yet, only those who are not in love say this. For lovers a new aesthetic, not failure to see, has taken hold. The shape of the beloved now defines the standard of beauty. In fact, the beloved has been written on the soul of the lover.³¹ The way into the lover's soul is the eyes.³² We observe these motifs in Gal 3:1. The cruciform figure of Christ has entered the Galatians through their eyes, and this fact makes their willingness to be seduced by the rivals the more astonishing: “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes (κατ’ ὀφθαλμοὺς) that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited (προεγράφη) as crucified!”

Furthermore, the motif of crucifixion in the amatory literature helps us understand how “Christ crucified” (1:4; 2:20; 3:1, 13; 6:12, 14) and Paul's crucifixion with Christ (2:19; 6:14) function in the rhetoric of the letter. Love is a tormenting experience, often compared with various types of torture, including the cross.³³ The crucified lover bears in his body the wounds of love—they are proof of his extreme devotion to the beloved. The Galatians need to know that their possible unfaithfulness to Christ and to Paul is deadly serious because of the depth to which they have been loved.

Not only is the beloved written on the lover's soul. The lover becomes the beloved's slave. Related to the motif of “labor” discussed above, the slavery of love (*servitium amoris*) was a major theme in erotic literature.³⁴ Paul employs this motif for a number of relationships. First, he is the slave of Christ, his beloved whom he seeks to please (1:10). Paul concludes the letter with the motif of branding (στίγματα, 6:17), a staple in the poetic expression of the beloved's owning and marking the lover as a master owns and marks slaves.³⁵ Secondly, in 5:13 the Galatians are exhorted to regard one another through the motif of love-induced slavery: διὰ ἀγάπης δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις (“through love become slaves to one another”). Bearing each other's burdens (6:2) might also be understood as an allusion to mutual slavery. Finally, in 5:24 Paul characterizes all believers in Jesus as “those who belong to Christ” (οἱ τοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ), the genitive of possession indicating slavery.

Finally, we may gather two related themes in Galatians under the category of

³¹*Greek Anthology* 5.274; Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale* 3.5; Tibullus 3.2.27-30.

³²For the eyes as the medium through which the beloved's beauty passes, see A. Walker, “Eros and the Eye in the Love-Letters of Philostratus,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 38 (1992) 132-148. See also Philostratus, *Epistles* 8, 10, 11, 12, 57; Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale* 1.4, 5, 9; *Greek Anthology* 12.83, 106, 109.

³³Fantham, *Comparative Studies*, 48, 88-89, 100-101; Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex*, 316-317; Zagagi, *Tradition and Originality in Plautus*, 69-76, 83-100. See also Chariton, *Chareas and Callirhoe* 6.7; Catullus 85, 99.

³⁴Lilja, *The Roman Elegists' Attitude to Women*, 76-100; Zagagi, *Tradition and Originality in Plautus*, 97, 109-117. See also Chariton, *Chareas and Callirhoe* 1.2; Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesian Tale* 1.4; Ovid, *Amores* 1.3.5; 2.17.1-10; Propertius 1.4.4; 2.23.22.

³⁵Lilja, *The Roman Elegists' Attitude to Women*, 77; Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex*, 225-227, 327. See also Chariton, *Chareas and Callirhoe* 2.4; Heliodorus, *An Ethiopian Story* 7.10; Tibullus 2.3.76-80; 2.4.1-6; 3.19.24; Martial 12.61.

“mutual exchange.” Here the language of Eros sounds like the language of friendship (φιλία). Friends, it was often said, have all things in common. Something similar is present in the notion of the benefit that passes between lovers.³⁶ The Galatians stand to lose precisely this benefit (Χριστὸς ὑμᾶς οὐδὲν ὠφελήσει, 5:2) if they are unfaithful to Christ (“Christ will be of no benefit to you”).

An even more complete union between lover and beloved is imagined in the notion of mutual ecstasy. The soul of the lover resides in the beloved. Even more, the beloved *becomes* the lover’s soul. The two lovers form one identity.³⁷ Paul may be alluding to the lovers’ union as he speaks about his relationship with Christ, which is characterized by mutual ecstasy: “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” The degree of mutual indwelling present in this passage is unparalleled in ancient literature except as an amatory motif.

VII. CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that the ancient language of erotic love influenced Paul’s rhetoric in Galatians. Much more work needs to be done in order to clarify the connections between the amatory motifs in Galatians and the argumentative use to which Paul put them. This much is clear, however: both Paul and his audience were familiar with the stock descriptions of unfaithfulness, rivals, unrequited love, the labor of love, and the effects of love. So familiar were they that Paul could play with the motifs and use them as metaphors for three critical relationships: the apostle (and the other missionaries) and the congregations; Paul and Christ; and Christ and the congregations. Paul’s decision to speak of these relationships in amatory terms witnesses to their exclusivity. As the lover and beloved can tolerate no third and survive in their union, so Christ and the congregations are united in exclusive love. ⊕

³⁶Lilja, *The Roman Elegists’ Attitude to Women*, 72.

³⁷Ibid., 196-204; Zagagi, *Tradition and Originality in Plautus*, 134-137; and especially Garrison, *Mild Frenzy*, 75-87.